

Marbled murrelets discovered in Elliott State Forest, put land sale in doubt



Nesting marbled murrelets, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, were discovered this past summer in the Elliott State Forest along Oregon's coast. (ESTHER BURKETT/The Associated Press)



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The discovery of threatened marbled murrelet seabirds has cast uncertainty over a plan to sell state-owned land in the Elliott State Forest in Coos County.

The protected seabird was spotted this summer by state surveyors and volunteers with [Coast Range Forest Watch](#), a conservation group that opposes the sale.

Before the discovery, when logging wouldn't have been restricted, three tracts for sale in the forest were valued at \$22.1 million. After the endangered species was found, the land's value dropped to \$3.6 million, according to state appraisals. Stands occupied by murrelets can't be logged and are worth less.

Timber industry representatives told an appraiser working for the Department of State Lands that they were unlikely to aggressively pursue the land, [because of the uncertainty arising from the bird](#).

The situation is yet another skirmish in Oregon's long-running conflict between the timber industry and environmental groups seeking to protect the threatened seabird that nests in coastal forests in Oregon, Washington and California.

Environmental groups say the discovery and devaluation of the land should end the state's sale effort. "It would be unconscionable to sell the land at a drastically discounted price because of the endangered wildlife that resides there," said Francis Eatherington, conservation director at Cascadia Wildlands. "This resource belongs to the public."

The state forest tract may still have value for the timber industry, according to industry representatives who spoke with the state's appraiser. They told the appraiser that timber could sometimes be thinned or salvaged even where birds are found. But the appraiser concluded that the Elliott State Forest tract isn't a good candidate for thinning or salvage logging.

The state owns some 700,000 acres, including most of the Elliott State Forest, and uses revenue from mineral and timber leases and sales on that land **to fund public education**.

The State Land Board is expected to discuss the land sale when it meets Dec. 10.

-- Rob Davis

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